

# Can U.S. buy embassy safety

■ The State Department wants \$4.4 billion to guard against terrorist attacks on its embassies, but it may be unwittingly following a system that will leave them tragically vulnerable.

No one questions the need for greater security. Libyan strong man Muammar Qadhafi threatened war against Americans around the world following his humiliation by the Sixth Fleet in the Gulf of Sidra. Officials vow to avoid a repetition of the 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Teheran or the April 1983 suicide bombing that killed 86 in the Beirut Embassy. A total of 33 Americans have been killed in 243 attacks and attempted attacks against U.S. embassies and personnel abroad since 1975.

A bill providing for new buildings and improved security at U.S. embassies is moving through Congress. Yet *U.S. News & World Report* has learned that government investigators and independent experts fear the costly program may overlook several glaring compromises of security:

- For \$1,000, anyone can legally purchase detailed architectural blueprints for any overseas mission to be built, giving potential foes a guided path for infiltration and attack.
- Several new embassies now under construction fall short of toughened security requirements.
- Background checks of the embassies' foreign employees, including security guards, are sometimes inadequate.
- New measures focus heavily on the threat of bombings and may overlook defending against other types of terrorist attacks.

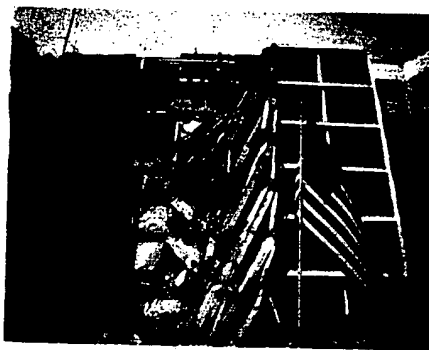
**The embassy bill**, now pending in the Senate after passing the House of Representatives by 389 to 7, proposes the most ambitious construction project in State Department history. Over the next five years, the U.S. intends to erect 79 new missions, beef up 175 existing facilities and launch programs ranging from buying fleets of armored vehicles to hiring thousands of local guards.

But how safe will the new embassies really be?

Current procedure allows any firm, American or foreign, to buy from the State Department's Office of Foreign Buildings the design and specifications for U.S. embassies scheduled to be built. Contractors routinely reproduce the plans for their subcontractors to estimate costs while preparing bids.

A State Department official acknowledges that even a company fronting for the Libyan government could

Blueprints are impressive, but an enterprising terrorist can get them for \$1,000. It's the system, diplomats explain



**In Beirut, the U.S. Embassy lies in ruins after 1983 suicide bombing**

acquire the floor plans for a U.S. mission under construction.

"The blueprint they can buy for \$1,000 doesn't jeopardize our security," insists Robert Lamb, director of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. "What we need to protect are the security systems and our work in secure areas, and that's classified work done by cleared American personnel."

Others see a definite risk.

"If you want to blow up a building, you have to know the layout," notes Shelly Lynn, an engineer with Controlled Demolition of Cliffside Park, N.J. He adds that if a person skilled in use of explosives knows a building's weak points, he can bring the whole structure down like a house of cards.

A former hostage from the Teheran

Embassy explains that having a blueprint is a great advantage to terrorists. If anybody wants to penetrate a building, particularly one that is designed against terrorist attacks, he would want to get hold of the floor plan."

The former hostage recalls that the U.S. Embassy in Teheran was "a simple and open building," which the Iranians entered through a basement door they had pinpointed. After the takeover, six Americans escaped to the Canadian Embassy through a back door left unguarded by the attackers.

In 1976, an Israeli rescue force was able to stage a precision operation to free hostages in Entebbe, Uganda, because it had the blueprint from the Israeli firm that built the airport.

U.S. News learned that one of the firms bidding for the new regional embassy in Oman is the Consolidated Contractors Company (CCC), headed by Hasib Sabbagh, a Palestinian business executive who served as Yassir Arafat's representative in arranging the withdrawal of Arafat's besieged Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon in 1982.

American intelligence documents ac-  
cuse Arafat of approving the 1973 as-  
sassination in Khartoum, Sudan, of  
U.S. Ambassador Cleo Noel and his  
deputy, George Moore.

Washington officials view Sabbagh as a moderate, and his 30-year-old firm is one of the region's largest. But terrorism experts are concerned that factions in the PLO could obtain blueprints for the building through individuals working for the company.

Contacted by *U.S. News* at CCC's



**In San Salvador, guards use mirrors to check under a car before it is allowed to enter the embassy grounds**



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